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# WHAT ARE COLLEGES FOR?

BY CHARLES UPSON CLARK

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AN indignant college graduate of thirty years ago, who finds that his friend's son has come home with the A. B. of that same college and no appreciable education or culture, has recently precipitated a long discussion in the alumni journal of the college in question. This college, like most others, has already recognized the inadequacy of the elective system, and has a committee at work on a revision of its curriculum.

Everywhere we see the same phenomenon. But its causes lie deeper than any mere reorganization of college courses can reach; and the situation is far more serious than is generally admitted. I propose here to point out three demoralizing factors which must be studied and as far as possible neutralized, or, at least, modified. The first is the elective system; the second, the rapid growth of the movement for a "practical"—meaning, generally, a vocational—education; the third and most serious, the luxuriant growth of "extra-curriculum activities," particularly social, athletic, and dramatic, which has been fostered by the elective system and by timidity on the part of school and college administrators.

Everybody knows that a considerable share of college students pick out what are called "snap" courses, in order to give themselves leisure for what they hold as the more important side of college life. The man referred to above gave a list of the scattered subjects taken by his friend's boy in college; and those who knew smiled at the "cinch" course which the boy laid out. It is a fact that when a new instructor appears in a presumably easy subject like English, Economics, or History, a few "scouts" elect his courses in order to be able to gauge them at their true

value. I remember the exultation of one of these prospectors as he shouted to me: "Botany Z 25 [let us say] is a grand course; here 'tis after Christmas, and we haven't yet had to get even a note-book."

The fact that so many elect these "snap" courses, combined with the undergraduate's intense desire to do what everybody else does, makes them almost a required curriculum; and that gave point to what a college graduate once said to me with a straight face: "I wish the 'snap' courses weren't so awfully dull."

The college administrations have vigorously aided this demoralization by judging a new instructor in general by the numbers he attracts without always investigating the causes. I have in mind one case where an instructor taught a language for Freshmen and also for Sophomores. At the time of the election of courses, he used always to tell his Freshmen: "You have had a year of my views and methods. One thing you come here for is to get different views and methods from specialists; so, much as I enjoy working with you, I advise you strongly for your own good to continue this subject with one of the three other instructors who teach it to Sophomores." This man was also a great believer in memorizing, and made his Sophomores learn many poems by heart, which none of the others did. He was soon notified by his superiors that he must be considered a failure as a Freshman teacher, because fewer of his Freshmen elected him in Sophomore year than was the case with the other Freshman-Sophomore instructors.

Furthermore, the genuine student is confronted with minor, but real troubles, like the conflicts of hours brought about by the excessive number of courses offered; the fact that certain courses come Saturday or Monday morning, whereas his parents are anxious for him to come home often for a week-end; and others come in the afternoon, a time which his foot-ball or crew duties make highly inconvenient. Then he is generally eager to save time in his preparation for a profession, and works one or even two years of his legal, medical, or pedagogic training into his college experience.

The elective system, then, needs thorough overhauling; and I shall later present a tentative college course to take its place. But we must first face the problem of the cleavage established between the colleges and the schools by the move-

ment toward vocational education. For years our Eastern colleges have been worried by the decreasing number of applicants from high schools (especially Western high schools); and the State Universities have been distressed by the increasing number of what a Wisconsin friend of mine calls "barbarians." The principle which some Western Commissioners of Education are trying to establish is that any subject taught by any high school in the State should be accepted by the State University as an entrance unit. Some of our old endowed universities have gone far on this road; one of them accepts blacksmithing, woodworking and chipping, filing and fitting, as proofs of readiness for culture. At least one of the colleges which still cling to entrance examinations has come very near adopting a system allowing high school graduates to present certificates for some part of their work.

These efforts of the colleges deserve our sincere sympathy. They have regarded themselves as the natural complement of the high schools; and they are trying to accommodate themselves to the great change which is passing over the latter. Why not admit now that the effort is hopeless? A generation of parents which has observed that the boy in overalls is better paid than the boy in "store clothes," and that the girl who can take dictation gets a better job than the poorly-trained teacher, insists that the high schools—nay, even the grammar schools—abandon mathematics, languages, literature, and history, and teach trades and preparation for minor places in business. The pressure exerted by these parents has made our superintendents and principals discover how well suited vocational training is to the needs of the children of the American proletariat and lower middle class; and if vocational high schools do give the foreman better apprentices and the business man better-trained stenographers and clerks, *c'est déjà quelque chose*. But we must recognize clearly that a college has a liberal education as its aim, while a vocational high school is designed to turn out boys and girls who can earn money immediately without further training. The college has a qualitative and ideal standard; the high school—possibly wisely—more and more of the quantitative and mercenary. High schools will remain instruments of higher culture, awakeners of a love for the noble and the beautiful, only where a large and well-educated community demands it; otherwise the "practical"

interests will inevitably get the upper hand; and if you or I wish our children sometime to know Plato and Dante, Adam Smith, and Edward Gibbon, we must send them for their early training to one or other of the numerous excellent private schools which the exigency has brought into being throughout the land.

The colleges, therefore, are undertaking a hopeless task in trying to lower their requirements to the achievements of the vocational high school. Furthermore, they are playing false to the noble men and women who are trying to keep their own high schools true to the old ideals of character-building rather than money-earning; for the chief argument they can employ is: "If we have no courses in Geometry or Virgil or French, we cannot prepare our boys and girls for Princeton or Bryn Mawr."

No, the colleges must not merely avoid lowering their standards: they need to raise their present terms of admission. The Rockefeller Foundation has pointed out in detail the inadequacy of the present requirements. The certificate system is *a priori* a failure in its prime purpose, which is, to assure the college that the incoming Freshmen may continue their education without loss of time in being "licked into shape." No two schools have the same standard; and in some schools, alas, certificates "*have* to be given." I know of one large New England high school where a boy who had flunked his mathematics was nevertheless certified for college because his father was so important politically that it would not do to withhold the certificate. Great diversity of attainment is the sure sequel of the certificate system.

But the examination system does not give much better results, so long as the colleges allow entrance with four or five conditions, and permit students to extend the examination over several years. There are always boys in knickerbockers at the entrance examinations, taking their first try at subjects which they may pass and then forget altogether in the three or four years before they enter. Then the examinations are far too easy. When a summer tutoring school can advertise that of ninety final candidates whom it prepared, eighty-nine were admitted, it is high time to jack up the requirements. I had recently in my own tutoring school a boy who had flunked four courses of the Junior year of a large Eastern institution of learning. One of these

courses was Advanced German. Not only had he never passed the entrance requirement in German, but he had never studied the subject at all! He had passed the entrance examinations in English; but he confided to me that he had read but one book in his life except those required in school or college; that this was "a red book" called *The Girl and the Bill*; that it had taken him all summer to read it, and that he never intended to read another. A most distinguished recent accession to the staff of one of our oldest colleges told me he was unable to guess how a large share of his Seniors had managed to get into college, and in his judgment a raising of the entrance requirements was the chief need of the college in question (which is reputed among tutors to be the hardest of all colleges for students to enter). I could fill these pages with anecdotes to illustrate my point; but I shall add only one—the advice given me fifteen years ago by the most distinguished tutor of that day at his college, now an honored professor and well-known scientist in that institution: "In preparing boys for English A, never allow them to read the books. It merely confuses them and wastes time. Coach them carefully in the plot of each book and the names of the characters; and make them learn by heart, with exact attention to the spelling and paragraphing, several short compositions on each book. Then they will be sure to pass!"

To my mind, there should be not only harder examinations, but either a recognition of the principle that men shall not enter college with more than one condition, or that the number entering shall be limited. The latter expedient in particular would make many a school athlete or social light more attentive to his work.

But I have not yet touched upon the greatest demoralizing factor—one which is now perhaps as effective in school as in college. The student (and perhaps the professor) is uncertain what constitutes a liberal education; but he knows that an election to the Ball and Chain Society, to the membership or managership of an athletic team, or the floor-walkership (so to speak) of the Junior Promenade, is something definite and tangible, and carries with it not merely honor and renown, but the satisfaction of "helping one's Alma Mater"—a satisfaction denied to the student who haunts the library and whose ambitions center in the essentially selfish distinction of a Phi Beta Kappa key.

To render any curriculum reform effective, some steps

must be taken to make students attend to business. As matters drift nowadays, a well-intentioned boy finds himself required by one student organization to report for three or four hours every afternoon during many weeks for strenuous exercise; by another, to report two evenings a week for a two-hour social function; and often he is called upon by others. If the college is to hold the respect of thoughtful parents, it must insist that no student is to give daily over two hours of his precious time to extra-curriculum activities. The ideal would be to make the course so stiff that there would be no time beyond that needed for exercise and reasonable social intercourse; but the easy-going instructors, who, under the elective system, set the pace for the others, will not change greatly overnight; so perhaps joint action by deans and student organizations is necessary. It may be as futile to expect a football or dramatic coach to give up his men for their studies during part of their time as it was to expect Austria and Russia to demobilize; but like disaster will overtake higher education unless arbitration steps in now. Perhaps the severest criticism of our present curriculum is that made by boys who say, and justly: "My football (or dramatic) training was the most valuable single experience of my college life."

Having now escorted our non-vocational student unconditionally past the entrance requirements, what shall we offer him? He knows some mathematics, a little history, some English, a little Latin and French or German—perhaps all three. We wish to make him accurate and thorough; a wide and critical observer; familiar with methods of research and investigation, and used to consulting and enjoying books; aware that, in the words of one of New York's ablest lawyers, "there is no satisfactory substitute for knowledge"; appreciative of art, music, and *belles-lettres*; well-grounded in history; and able at least to read the chief European languages.

Our colleges now generally require some fifteen hours of recitations or lectures a week, and allow eighteen or twenty. It would be desirable to raise the requirement to eighteen hours, so that seventy-two or seventy-five shall be needed for graduation. That involves raising the tuition fee—a change long impending, and calling for no discussion. Our Freshman will therefore have to take six courses of three hours a week. One of these will naturally be English

—mainly composition and debating, with guidance in general reading. Training in expression should be the keynote to this general elementary course. The other five courses should also continue and supplement work begun in school. The boy should continue his Latin, or continue or begin Greek; as the languages of our civilization and literature in their earlier stages, they form an indispensable background for any comprehensive view of our modern life. He should continue Mathematics, taking normally Mechanics and Trigonometry—nothing better for mental training has yet been devised. He should begin Chemistry, and realize the component elements of his surroundings; if he is already grounded in Chemistry, he may continue it or commence Biology, the field of the last century's great triumphs. He must keep on with his French or German; if proficient in both, he may begin Spanish or Italian. His previous study of History should be enriched and consolidated by a thorough general course in European History, assimilating important outstanding facts and investigating some problem, under competent direction.

In Sophomore year, the English course should amplify and intensify the earlier work in expression—a task often handed over, and not wisely, to debating and dramatic coaches and “Lit.” editors. Lectures should give a comprehensive view of the world's literary forms and history—the epic, drama, novel; and preceptorial supervision should guide the reading and discussion. Latin should introduce the student to Tacitus, Horace, and Catullus, and give him some idea of the treasures of medieval literature. Greek should take him to Homer, or, if he is more advanced, to the Attic dramatists. One of these courses may be relegated to Junior year. A broad and thorough course in Physics is essential. Biology should be insisted on, if he has not already had it. French or German should again be required; and the courses in these languages may serve not only linguistic, but also high literary or historical aims. Then our Sophomore may reasonably choose between Spanish and Economics (preferably Economic Debates).

Our Junior need not be tied so closely to a schedule. He must, however, continue French or German; he should study Psychology and Geology, and take American History (with Civics). He may then choose what he wishes for the remaining half of his time; but the college should make every effort



to avoid the extravagant lavishness of courses, particularly in English, Economics, and History, which burdens its budget at present.

The Senior should study Anthropology, and take some general course in Philosophy. He should also follow a course in the general history of Art. If, at the close of Junior year, he has not passed satisfactory examinations in French and German, he should take the subject in which he is deficient.

Having spent his four years in this fashion, our college graduate will have something well-rounded to show for his B. A.; a foundation on which to build in his later study and observation; a vantage-point from which to judge and criticize; and an equipment which will help him intelligently to appreciate life and men. And that I conceive to be the chief aim of the college.

CHARLES UPSON CLARK.